

Columbia
Stereo
M 30683



MASTERWORKS

SIDEWINDER

CREATED BY MORTON SUBOTNICK ON THE ELECTRIC MUSIC BOX



SIDEWINDER

Created by MORTON SUBOTNICK

Side 1 SIDEWINDER—PART I

Side 2 SIDEWINDER—PART II

The selections are ASCAP.

Cover design: Teresa Alfieri

Three Synthesized Dynamics

Recently, in a film class, a student asked why I had used the word "dynamic" as a noun, when she had always thought it was an adjective. I answered that to refer to the *dynamic* of something—an object, action or event—was to shift attention from the surface appearance of it to the energy within, or, from its static aspect to that which was still in flux and its way of behaving. I went on to say that, ever since $E=mc^2$, we'd begun to recognize that what we'd once thought of as nouns were also verbs and what we'd once thought of as secondary qualities, or sideline modifications, had become primary elements in their own right. Awareness of the interchangeability of matter and energy had created a profound ambiguity between *process* and *thing*.

Certainly, one of our problems, our very human problems, in the twentieth century is acclimating to the changing dynamic of our environment. The new energy modes that electronics and technology pour at us so steadily reach and affect our nervous systems at a very deep level while we are coping distractedly with the objects embodying these energies. This is the subliminal sleight-of-hand that McLuhan has called "massage." The gap between the coping, which is immediate, and the acclimating, which is more gradual, tends to keep us in a continual state of shock at this very important level of our being—"turned off," "numb," *anaesthetized*. We do a number of things to recover. One of them is art, aesthetic experience. Note: the opposite of aesthetic is anesthetic.

This particular function of artistic experience has always existed to a greater or lesser degree. In our time, changes in the environment have come to occur with such incredible speed and frequency that artists are responding to this "future shock" out of needs so deep, personal, and constant that the once clearly defined boundaries between art and reality have been blurred. The proscenium comes down, the arena gives way to the street, the painting leaves the wall and "happens" in full gallery space. Pathetically—in every sense of that word—the "silence" of the empty canvas attempts critical transfusion of aesthetic energy to the very utensils of our daily routine: soap boxes, soup cans. . . . Another man devotes himself to the creation of softened replicas of the hardware that fills our domestic landscape. And, at the same time, *stasis* becomes an aesthetic value in its own right, allowing the *presence of the present* to momentarily assert itself outside the perpetual future of the careening *real* continuum.

It seems quite likely to me that no other individual medium confronts the matter of acclimating to the most elemental dynamic of the new environment more incisively, more organically than the electronic synthesizer. But our pre-conditioning about what to expect from a "musical experience" tends to prevent us from ever really getting through to the very subtle core-dynamic where the life of electronic music—especially the Subotnick-Buchla mode—is to be found.

Electronic Timbre

Subotnick's pieces speak to us directly in the voice of the prevailing energy of our evolving environment—the electronic. Everyone talks about this technological *weather*, but *Sidewinder* does something about it, too. It's one thing to draw off in mock-romantic agony and wallow in the pity of it all, the tragic consequences of "we become what we behold" in an industrial era. It is something

else to respond to the equally real converse: *What we behold becomes*. And in the aesthetic experience—the deepest and truest of all *entertainments*—the artist offers experimental exercise in the discernment of qualities and values beyond our previous tuneable range (to refer side-long to Bucky Fuller). What we recollect in the relative tranquility of aesthetic experience is our selves. We get it together. We reevaluate and reintegrate and come to ride more easily in the environmental harness of elements strange and seemingly incompatible with our conditioned values and expectations. To the present generation, *out of sight* isn't out of mind—it's into it.

Gestural Synthesis

Precisely because the timbre dynamic of the electronic synthesizer suggests tones, textures and plasticities organic to our environmental situation in the second half of the twentieth century, its sounds seem to grow from and put forth scenaric elements associable with our daily experience in a number of ways. And this leads to a problem of listener's bias. Subotnick's compositions can't be received as signifying "program" music, on the one hand, or "pure" music transposed to the electronic, on the other. One must find a third wave-length to tune in on.

In Subotnick's pieces, the synthesizer is not used in order to render the visible but, rather, as Paul Klee preferred in all art, *to render visible*. In the sounds of *Sidewinder* gestural events occur that at times seem to embody ideas, actions, encounters, confrontation, risings and fallings.

When the composer asked me to do the liner notes for this album (because one smoggy day early in its life I had referred to the present piece as "sidewinder" and it stuck), I began listening to the final version for leads. At first, it all *had* seemed very scenaric. A lot of this undoubtedly had to do with my awareness of Mort's involvement with multi-media and my own involvement with film. It also had to do with the business of having given the piece a visualistic name. Ear-shock seemed to promote eye-bias. But the more I listened to *Sidewinder* and got friendly with it the less scenaric it became. And I underline "it" because I don't mean to say that listening to *Sidewinder* had nothing at all to do with some visualizable, quasi-scenaric experience. The sounds themselves, however, began to take on an integrity, an inviolability at a level of pure auditory gesture on a wave-length all their own somewhere between the signification and the abstraction traditional modes of music had conditioned me for. *Sidewinder* became (and remains) the center for any number of meditative trips, like an unwinding sonic mandala—peculiarly Western, though, right down to the electronic and technological overtones of its synthesized base.

Non-Illusionism

What I've written so far, suggests a new kind of experience whose communication is greatly dependent upon the listener's ability to make a primary encounter with its essential elements. The final phase of this communication—the "primary encounter"—occurs through the non-illusionistic dynamic of *Sidewinder*, the point where you not only play it but it plays you.

Nearly all of our past art—the so-called representational—has offered *transport*. A canvas on a wall is a window on the cypresses of southern France, or coast of England, or face of someone quite removed from that wall and room in both time and space to say nothing of material. As such, it is a rather direct negation of the time, space and matter in which one is immediately involved. "Escape" of this kind can be bracing but then the attempt at inner experience always tends to occur in terms of an *elsewhere*. Today's artist seems much more intent on restoring the *presence of the present*, so much so that it is almost as if he were a penitent re-deeming the illusionistic modes of the past. The narrative or story mode has, after all, always been a ritual annihilation of the present: "Escape." Each story unit would move you through a beginning to a middle to an end, calling you into a future out of a past with virtually no descent into a relentlessly progressing *now*. The artist (to say nothing of an entire generation and third world) has sensed the immorality of the obliteration of *now*, its *un-responsibility* as a mode of consciousness, as a way of relating to environmental reality. Today, theater is often simply an intensification of the given environmental moment allowed by the space, time, and population of a performance company. Films reveal themselves as films—sprockets and leader no longer edited out—and often re-

direct our attention to physical realities of the material situation in which we are actually viewing them, rather than transporting us to the adventures of a desert sheik or gun-slinging cowboy. The great adventure of our time is *re-entry*—into ourselves, into ourselves here and now—perhaps because for the first time in recorded history we can really do something about it. And, also, but not for the first time, we *must*. It is no longer even clever to say: "Why do I want realism in my art when I can find it in the streets." The streets no longer *are* viably real because they are filled with irrelevance and futility.

If we compare, in a phenomenological way, some of the differences between recordings of "live" music (the term applied most frequently and most piquantly to non-electronic music these days) as opposed to recordings created by the synthesist, a few interesting clarifications emerge regarding the question of illusionism. The disc or tape containing a performance of a Beethoven symphony, for example, is really a symbolic experience of that performance several times removed. It is symbolic not only because conductor and orchestra or soloist are absent when the recording is played; it is symbolic not only because there is no way of knowing if the piece as performed coincided reasonably with the composer's original intentions—although each of these matters does contribute to the general symbolic nature of such a listening experience. It is symbolic, most of all, at the level of *kinds-of-energy* transmitted and received. Recorded "live" music is mechanically agitated air vibrating into a microphone, imprinted mechanically on a disc or magnetically on a tape. We think of traditional music and its instrumentation as highly humanistic, as opposed to the technology of electronic *media*. But, romantic prejudices aside for the moment, where does the greater amount of mediation take place? Certainly not in the synthesizer which is a closed electronic system through which the composer himself produces signals for amplification. Replayed by the listener through the same process of mediation, the aesthetic continuum initiated by the synthesist, remains virtually unchanged and intact. The listener is not called upon, even subliminally, to participate through "willing suspension of disbelief" which is also, necessarily, a willed suspension of part of himself. This special integrity or cohesion of the electronic experience is one of its most essential qualities, perhaps its ultimate *synthesis*. That non-illusionism should be anything more than an interesting side-line concept related to Subotnick's work much less an integral, even overriding element, might at first seem a bit strange. We would tend, possibly, to write it off as "subliminal" and let it go at that. If anything, however, this kind of dynamic—energy mode—seems to register right at the threshold of presently evolved consciousness and is discernible through engagement of sensibilities that ordinarily forfeit the opportunity of perception in the daily routines and expediences of an industrial, corporate society.

At present, perceptions of these dynamics seem to amount to *visceral discernments*, awareness in parts of our bodies and at levels of our sensorium where we are habitually tuned out. But in the aesthetic experience of a synthesizer piece the listener is spared the further anaesthesia of illusionism's "willing suspension." What you hear is what you got and it is all *anyone* ever had, including the composer.

—Don Skoller

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MORTON SUBOTNICK

Some of the best electronic music of the past decade, including *Touch*, *Silver Apples of the Moon*, and *The Wild Bull*, has been written by Subotnick. Born in 1933, Subotnick received an MA in Composition from Mills College, studying with Milhaud and Kirschner. After founding the Mills Performing Group and the San Francisco Tape Music Center, in 1967 Subotnick became Musical Director of the Lincoln Center Repertory Theatre, taught in the Intermedia Arts Program at New York University and was Director of Electronic Music at the Electric Circus. In 1969, he became Associate Dean of the School of Music and Director of Electronic Music at the California Institute of the Arts at Los Angeles.

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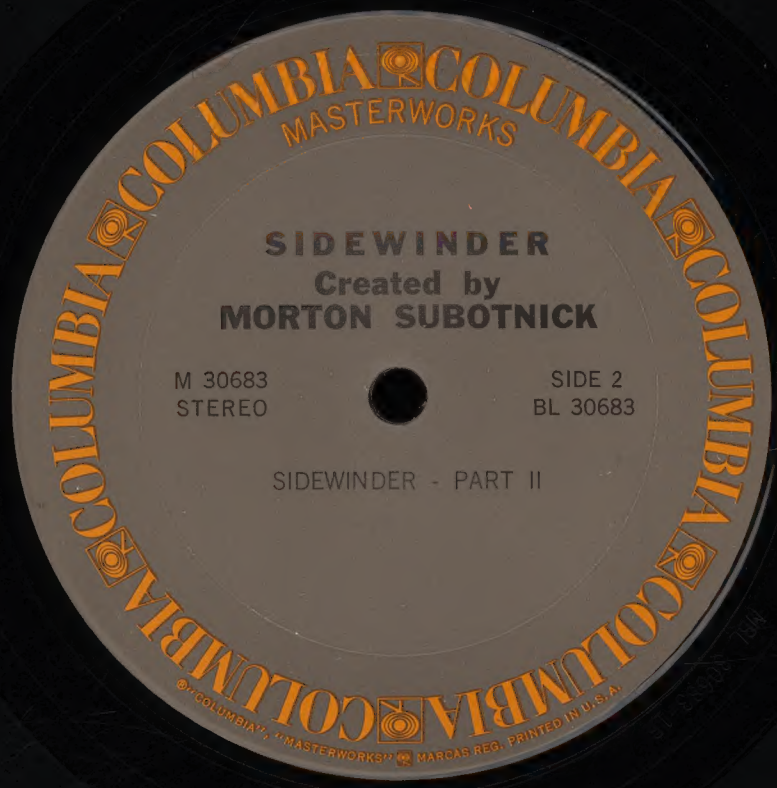
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M 30683
STEREO

SIDE 1
AL 30683

SIDEWINDER - PART 1

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SIDEWINDER - PART II

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